

# *Psalms*

## *How to Read the Psalms*

Lesson #1 for January 6, 2024

Scriptures: 1 Chronicles 16:7; Nehemiah 12:8; Psalm 25:1-5; 33:1-3; 82:8; 121:7; Romans 8:26-27.

1. Today, we begin our study of the book of Psalms, also known as the Psalter. In order to get a little clearer understanding of why they say what they do, we need to understand: (1) Who wrote the psalms, (2) Why they wrote, and (3) What the circumstances were.
2. We also need to know that Jesus and the apostles clearly believed that the songs/psalms were inspired.

**Luke 24:44-45:** <sup>44</sup> Then he [Jesus] said to them [on the road to Emmaus], “These are the very things I told you about while I was still with you: everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the writings of the prophets, and the Psalms had to come true.” <sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation\** (2nd ed., Luke 24:44-45). New York: American Bible Society [abbreviated as *Good News Bible*].<sup>†‡</sup>

3. Psalms is a book of hymns and prayers. Despite the fact that some psalms raise questions in our minds about what was going on, we still believe that the psalms were inspired by God to represent the full range of human emotions and responses to environments that are common to human beings. Could words that apply vengeance against one’s enemies be inspired by God?
4. Some scholars believe that the psalms are quoted in the New Testament more than any other Old Testament book. Compare Mark 12:10-11 with Psalm 118:22-23; John 10:34-35 with Psalm 82:6; and John 13:18 with Psalm 41:9.
5. How many different people do you think contributed to the psalms? How long a time span do you think is covered by the Psalms? Do you consider them all inspired? Who wrote the most? Do you consider the hymns in our hymn books to be inspired? Why would the Psalms be different? Do you think there were uninspired “psalms” that may have been used in the temple services? Would it be safe to pick a verse from any portion of the Psalms and use it by itself apart from its context?

[From Nelson’s:] The psalms were originally individual poems. With the passing of time these were collected to form smaller books. The Book of Psalms in its present form comprises five of these smaller books (see below). The earliest known individual psalm is that of Moses (Ps. 90); the latest is probably Psalm 137, which could not have been written before the sixth century B.C. Though most of the psalms were written and collected during the Davidic era, or shortly thereafter, the final compilation of Psalms was probably not complete until the latter half of the fifth century B.C., during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (450–425 B.C.)—Thomas Nelson Publishers.

(1996). *Nelson's Complete Book of Bible Maps & Charts: Old and New Testaments* (Rev. and updated ed.). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

6. No other book of the Bible includes writings from so many different authors as does the Psalms. They span of time from Moses to Ezra/Nehemiah after the Babylonian captivity.

[BSG:] By way of introduction to this quarter's study, we will touch on the following preliminary topics:

1. The historical background to the book of Psalms
2. The various genres or categories of songs in the collection
3. Biblical guidance for worship

Additionally, we shall enlarge our study of the Psalter by surveying the following subjects: (a) the structure of the Psalms, (b) the various literary tools the psalmists used to express their emotions, and (c) the distinct divisions of books within the Psalter itself.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* 13.

7. The Psalms were written in the form of poetry. Poetry was not the same in ancient Hebrew times as it is in our day. There was no rhyme as we would understand it. Their rhythm consisted of parallelism, imagery, merism, and wordplays that are very difficult to translate from one language to another.

8. Some of the major foci of the Psalms:

Nature	Psalms 8, 19, 29, 104
Historical and National	Psalms 46, 68, 79, 105, 106, 114
Didactic	Psalms 1, 15, 34, 71
Messianic	Psalms 2; 8; 16; 22-24; 40; 41; 45; 68; 69; 72; 89; 96-99; 102; 110; 118; 132
Deity	Psalms 45:6; 110:1
Sonship	Psalms 2:7
Incarnation	Psalms 40:6,7
Priesthood	Psalms 110:4
Betrayal	Psalms 41:9
Rejection	Psalms 118:22
Resurrection	Psalms 16:9,10
Ascension	Psalms 68:18

[Believer's:] *Typological-prophetic psalms*—e.g. Psalm 22, where the writer describes his own experience which is transcended by that of Jesus the Messiah; (2) *indirectly messianic*—e.g. Psalms 2; 45; 72; these were penned for a king of Israel or a royal occasion in general, but their ultimate and climactic fulfillment is realized in Christ; and (3) *typical messianic psalms*—these are less obvious: the psalmist in some sense is a type of Christ (Ps. 34:20), but not all aspects of the psalm necessarily apply to the

Messiah (see also Ps. 109:8; cf. Acts 1:20).—Criswell, W. A., Patterson, P., Clendenen, E. R., Akin, D. L., Chamberlin, M., Patterson, D. K., & Pogue, J. (Eds.). (1991). *Believer's Study Bible\** (electronic ed., Ps 1:1). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

9. Many of the Psalms are meant to be used as communal worship songs or prayers.

**[From Believer's Study Bible:]** The book of Psalms, sometimes called the Psalter, includes the prayers and the hymns of some of the most important people in the Bible, from Moses to the Exiles in Captivity. The Psalms are grouped into five collections or books as follows:

Book 1	Psalms 1-41
Book 2	Psalms 42-72
Book 3	Psalms 73-89
Book 4	Psalms 90-106
Book 5	Psalms 107-150

Book 1 shows an affinity for the divine name YAHWEH, while Book 2 prefers Elohim. The reason for this phenomenon is unknown. Each of the first four books concludes with a brief doxology, while Psalm 150 is a doxology within itself and constitutes an appropriate conclusion to the entire Psalter (some see Psalms 1,2 serving as an introduction and 146-150 serving as the conclusion). Jewish tradition explains the five-book arrangement as a conscious echo of the Pentateuch, but it is more probable that this is incidental rather than intentional. Indeed, the division between Books IV and V (Ps. 106 and Ps. 107) seems arbitrary.—Criswell, W. A., Patterson, P., Clendenen, E. R., Akin, D. L., Chamberlin, M., Patterson, D. K., & Pogue, J. (Eds.). (1991). *Believer's Study Bible\** (electronic ed., Ps 1:1). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

**1 Chronicles 16:7:** <sup>7</sup>It was then that David first gave Asaph and his fellow-Levites the responsibility for singing praises to the Lord.—*Good News Bible.\**

**Nehemiah 12:8:** Levites: The following were in charge of the singing of hymns of thanksgiving: Jeshua, Binnui, Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, and Mattaniah.—*Good News Bible.\**

10. Even in the New Testament, Psalms, and songs are mentioned in a similar way.

**Colossians 3:16:** Christ's message in all its richness must live in your hearts. Teach and instruct each other with all wisdom. Sing psalms, hymns, and sacred songs; sing to God with thanksgiving in your hearts.—*Good News Bible.\**

**James 5:13:** Are any of you in trouble? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises.—*Good News Bible.\**

11. Considering what you know about the use of the temple in ancient times with altars and burnt offerings and a lavar where only the priests were allowed to go, how does that fit with these ideas about communal worship? Where did the communal worship take place?

12. The original title of the book of Psalms was *Tahillim* in the Hebrew or *Praises*. Our title *Psalms* comes from the Greek word *psalmoi* found in the *Septuagint*. Some interesting subheadings are found under the titles of some Psalms, suggesting who the author might have been, or how they are to be sung or played.

13. Clearly, certain Psalms were composed for special occasions.

[BSG:] The Psalms were an indispensable part of Israel's worship. For example, they were used in temple dedications, religious feasts, and processions, as well as during the setting down of the ark of the covenant in Jerusalem.

"The Songs of Ascents" (*Psalms 120–134*), also known as the pilgrimage songs, were traditionally sung during the pilgrimage to Jerusalem at the three major annual festivals (*Exod. 23:14–17*). The "Egyptian Hallel" (*Psalms 113–118*) and the "Great Hallel" (*Psalms 136*) were sung at the three major annual festivals, including the festivals of the New Moon and the dedication of the temple. The Egyptian Hallel received a significant place in the Passover ceremony. Psalms 113 and 114 were sung at the beginning of the Passover meal and Psalms 115–118 at the end (*Matt. 26:30*). The "Daily Hallel" (*Psalms 145–150*) was incorporated into the daily prayers in the synagogue morning services.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide\** for Sabbath Afternoon, December 31.†§

14. One of the challenges to our understanding of how communal worship was handled in the Old Testament is that synagogues were believed to have come into existence during the Babylonian exile, when the Temple in Jerusalem was in ruins. Some think that it was Ezekiel who was the founder. It became much more common in the days of the Hasmoneans after 200 B.C. In order for a community to have a synagogue, there had to be at least 10 adult Jewish males who constituted the elders or rulers.

15. So, who wrote the Psalms?

[BSG:] King David, whose name appears in the titles of most psalms, was active in organizing the liturgy of Israel's worship. He is called "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (*2 Sam. 23:1*). The New Testament attests to Davidic authorship of various psalms (*Matt. 22:43–45; Acts 2:25–29, 34, 35; Acts 4:25; Rom. 4:6–8*). Numerous psalms were composed by the temple musicians who were also Levites: for example, Psalm 50 and Psalms 73–83 by Asaph; Psalm 42, Psalms 44–47, Psalm 49, Psalm 84, Psalm 85, Psalms 87–88 by the sons of Korah; Psalm 88 also by Heman the Ezrahite; and Psalm 89 by Ethan the Ezrahite. Beyond them, Solomon (*Psalms 72, Psalm 127*) and Moses (*Psalms 90*) authored some psalms.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide\** for Monday, January 1.†§

16. What happened to the rest of the works of Solomon?

**1 Kings 4:32:** He [Solomon] composed 3,000 proverbs and more than a thousand songs.—*Good News Bible.\*†*

17. If a psalmist was angry, discouraged, or depressed and cried out to God, should we consider his cry, including the words of despair or discouragement as “inspired”? In what sense? Is it acceptable to express feelings of depression? What about Jesus’s cry at the cross? (See Matthew 27:46; Compare Psalm 22:1a.) Or, in Gethsemane?
18. We understand that the Holy Spirit inspired the psalmists to write what they did. But, we also recognize that many of the feelings and ideas that were expressed fit perfectly with our situation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Do we need to cry out more often in our situations, recognizing that God is a part of everything we do and think and say?

[From the writings of Ellen G. White=EGW:] The psalms of David pass through the whole range of experience, from the depths of conscious guilt and self-condemnation to the loftiest faith and the most exalted communing with God.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*\* 754.3.‡

[From Nelson:] The psalms lead us through the valleys and peaks of human experience, but in the end they guide us to the praise of our loving Creator.... The psalms were written in the language of the human spirit, the utterances of the soul. The psalms are not cool, reasoned prose, but deeply emotional works that use wrenching language, dramatic exaggeration, and figurative speech.—Radmacher, E. D., Allen, R. B., & House, H. W. (1997). *The Nelson Study Bible: New King James Version* (Ps). Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers.

19. The Psalms were a form of Hebrew poetry. We sometimes speak of “poetic license.” When David spoke of soaking his bed with his tears (Psalms 6:6) don’t you think that was exaggerated? Is it okay for someone to use hyperbole under inspiration?

“All night I flood my bed with weeping.” (Psalms 6:6, *New Living Translation* [NLT]\*)

“Day and night I have only tears for food.” (Psalms 42:3, NLT\*)

“You have collected all my tears in your bottle.

You have recorded each one in your book.” (Psalms 56:8, NLT\*)

“You have fed us with sorrow

and made us drink tears by the bucketful.” (Psalms 80:5, NLT\*)

“Rivers of tears gush from my eyes

because people disobey your instructions.” (Psalms 119:136, NLT\*)

20. Poets are notorious for use of “poetic license.” This is not wrong; but, it needs to be understood for what it is. David apparently felt like that at the time. It helps us to recognize that in our day, those who are moved by powerful emotions—even depression—can cry out to God in honest prayer about how they feel at the time; and God will understand.
21. Is everything that we sing in our hymns today theologically accurate? What do we mean when we sing: “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it for me”? If prayer is “conversation with God as with a friend,” how could we “sing while passing through the air, farewell, farewell, sweet hour of prayer”? Is it that we never plan to speak to God again? Do we feel comfortable singing about one of God’s children as “such a worm as I”? Should

healthy heterosexual men feel comfortable singing “I come to the garden alone, He walks with me, and talks with me and tells me I am His own”? (Or, is God also female?)

22. Ellen White says that “prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend.” (*Steps to Christ* 93 (1892)). So, if many of our hymns are to be regarded as prayers, then we must sing them as expressions of the original songwriters. Under some circumstances they may represent our feelings at the time we are singing; but, often, they will not. That does not mean that we should not join in the singing.

23. What should we do with passages in the Psalms which appear to be contrary to our Christian understanding of God? For example:

**Psalms 2:11-12:** Serve the Lord with fear ... lest he be angry ... for his wrath is quickly kindled.—*Revised Standard Version*.\*

**Psalms 77:10:** “It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.”—*Revised Standard Version*.\*

24. Would it ever be proper to describe the wrath of God as “quickly kindled”? We have many verses that say God is “slow to anger.” (Compare Exodus 34:6-7; Numbers 14:18; Psalms 103:8; 145:8; Proverbs 15:18; 16:32; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3; Nehemiah 9:17.) What should we do with such conflicts? Should we collect all the verses and “stack them up” or “compare” them somehow? Or, count them? Should we look for evidence in the stories to see if God is actually quick to get angry? Or, should we just admit that this is a biblical contradiction? After reading the second Psalm for worship, what would you pray about? How do you suppose Jesus spoke the words: “You are of your father, the devil”? John 8:44 (*RSV*\*) What do we do with passages which appear to be shocking? Or, harsh? Or, authoritarian? Would it be acceptable for a mother to cry out as her child is dying? Was David still loyal and totally committed despite all these cries?

25. Psalms 2:11-12 is a challenge even for translators. There are several verses in this chapter that do not sound like the normal picture of God that we have. (See Psalms 2:4,5,9.) Does God ever speak very sternly to His children? What about at Mount Sinai? Look at Romans 9:20. We sometimes must discipline our children, and they fear us at the time. We hope that does not change the fact that we are normal, loving, and kind parents! When people are acting immaturely and not taking God seriously, He sometimes finds it necessary to speak using very strong language. The greatest example of this is probably the three angels’ messages. (See Revelation 14:6-12.) God is willing even to appear harsh and fearsome if that is what it takes to get our attention so we may quietly listen to what He wants to say to us.

26. In the Psalms we find hymns glorifying God for his faithfulness and love; the psalmists offered an untiring devotion to God. This did not mean that they tried to overlook or ignore any problems that they were facing.

27. Consider some examples of David’s cries against his enemies.

**Psalm 3:1-8:** <sup>1</sup> I have so many enemies, LORD,  
so many who turn against me!

<sup>2</sup> They talk about me and say,

“God will not help him.”

<sup>3</sup> But you, O LORD, are always my shield from danger;  
you give me victory  
and restore my courage.

<sup>4</sup> I call to the LORD for help,  
and from his sacred hill he answers me.

<sup>5</sup> I lie down and sleep,  
and all night long the LORD protects me.

<sup>6</sup> I am not afraid of the thousands of enemies  
who surround me on every side.

<sup>7</sup> Come, LORD! Save me, my God!  
You punish all my enemies  
and leave them powerless to harm me.

<sup>8</sup> Victory comes from the LORD—  
may he bless his people.—*Good News Bible*.\*

**Psalm 33:1-3:** All you that are righteous,  
shout for joy for what the LORD has done;  
praise him, all you that obey him.

<sup>2</sup> Give thanks to the LORD with harps,  
sing to him with stringed instruments.

<sup>3</sup> Sing a new song to him,  
play the harp with skill, and shout for joy!—*Good News Bible*.\*

**Psalm 109:6-15:** <sup>6</sup> Choose some corrupt judge to try my enemy,  
and let one of his own enemies accuse him.

<sup>7</sup> May he be tried and found guilty;  
may even his prayer be considered a crime!

<sup>8</sup> May his life soon be ended;  
may someone else take his job!

<sup>9</sup> May his children become orphans,  
and his wife a widow!

<sup>10</sup> May his children be homeless beggars;  
may they be driven from the ruins they live in!

<sup>11</sup> May his creditors take away all his property,  
and may strangers get everything he worked for.

<sup>12</sup> May no one ever be kind to him  
or care for the orphans he leaves behind.

<sup>13</sup> May all his descendants die,

and may his name be forgotten in the next generation.

<sup>14</sup> May the LORD remember the evil of his ancestors  
and never forgive his mother's sins.

<sup>15</sup> May the LORD always remember their sins,  
but may they themselves be completely forgotten!—*Good News Bible*.\*

28. Would there ever be a time for these words to be used in church during worship?

[BSG:] The Psalms make the believing community aware of the full range of human experience, and they demonstrate that believers can worship God in every season in life. In them we see the following: (1) Hymns that magnify God for His majesty and power in creation, His kingly rule, judgment, and faithfulness. (2) Thanksgiving psalms that express profound gratitude for God's abundant blessings. (3) Laments that are heartfelt cries to God for deliverance from trouble. (4) Wisdom psalms that provide practical guidelines for righteous living. (5) Royal psalms that point to Christ, who is the sovereign King and Deliverer of God's people. (6) Historical psalms that recall Israel's past and highlight God's faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness to teach the coming generations not to repeat the mistakes of their ancestors but to trust God and remain faithful to His covenant.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* for Tuesday January 2.\* [How many of the Psalms were originally prayers?]<sup>‡</sup>

**2 Samuel 23:1-2:** <sup>1</sup> David son of Jesse was the man whom God made great, whom the God of Jacob chose to be king, and who was the composer of beautiful songs for Israel. These are David's last words:

<sup>2</sup> The Spirit of the LORD speaks through me;  
his message is on my lips.—*Good News Bible*.\*

**Romans 8:26-27:** <sup>26</sup> In the same way the Spirit also comes to help us, weak as we are. For we do not know how we ought to pray; the Spirit himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express. <sup>27</sup> And God, who sees into our hearts, knows what the thought of the Spirit is; because the Spirit pleads with God on behalf of his people and in accordance with his will.—*Good News Bible*.\*

29. The psalmists mentioned a number of things about God to raise questions about our own personal experience. See Psalm 16:8; Psalm 44:8; Psalm 46:1; Psalm 47:1,7; Psalm 57:2; Psalm 68:8; Psalms 82:8; and Psalm 121:7. These passages make it very clear that the psalmists felt that God was intimately with them at all times. Their world was God-centered.

30. The worship of God and thoughts about God were front and center in the lives of the psalmists. That is a very different situation than the lives of most people in our day.

[BSG:] The Psalms are inspired prayers and praises of Israel, and so, in the Psalms the voice is that of God intermingled with that of His people. The Psalms assume the dynamics of vivid interactions with God. The psalmists address God personally as "my God," "O Lord," and "my King" (*Ps. 5:2, Ps. 84:3*). The psalmists often implore God to "give ear" (*Ps. 5:1*), "hear my prayer" (*Ps. 39:12*), "look" (*Ps. 25:18*), "answer me" (*Ps. 102:2*), and "deliver me" (*Ps. 6:4, NKJV*). These are clearly the expressions of someone praying



to God.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* for Wednesday, January 3.†§

31. But, that presents a problem for us in trying to understand where God is and what He actually does.

[BSG:] The psalmist is aware that God's dwelling place is in heaven, but at the same time, God dwells in Zion, in the sanctuary among His people. God is at the same time far and near, everywhere, and in His temple (*Ps. 11:4*), hidden (*Ps. 10:1*) and disclosed (*Ps. 41:12*). In the Psalms these apparently mutually exclusive characteristics of God are brought together. The psalmists understood that proximity and remoteness were inseparable within the true being of God (*Ps. 24:7–10*). The psalmists understood the dynamics of this spiritual tension. Their awareness of God's goodness and presence, amid whatever they were experiencing, is what strengthens their hope while they wait for God to intervene, however and whenever He chooses to do so.

How can the Psalms help us understand that we cannot limit God to certain aspects of our existence only? What might be parts of your life in which you are seeking to keep the Lord at a distance?—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* for Thursday, January 4.†§

[BSG:] The book of Psalms provides evidence of some already-existing collections of psalms: the Korahite collections (*Psalms 42–49, 84, 85, 87, 88*), the Asaphite collection (*Psalms 73–83*), the Songs of the Ascents (*Psalms 120–134*), and the Hallelujah Psalms (*Psalms 111–118, 146–150*). Psalm 72:20 bears witness to a smaller collection of David's psalms.

While most psalms are associated with the time of King David and early monarchy (tenth century B.C.), the collection of psalms continued to grow through the following centuries: the divided monarchy, the exile, and the postexilic period. It is conceivable that the Hebrew scribes under the leadership of Ezra combined the existing smaller collections of psalms into one book when they worked on establishing the services of the new temple.

The fact that scribes consolidated the book of Psalms does not take away from their divine inspiration. The scribes, like the psalmists, were devoted servants of God, and their work was directed by God (*Ezra 7:6, 10*). The divine-human nature of the Psalms is comparable to the union of the divine and the human in the incarnated Lord Jesus.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* for Friday, January 5.†§

[EGW:] But the Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine and the human. Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man. Thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ, that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." John 1:14.—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*\* 5.4 [Introduction].‡

[BSG:] What does it mean that the Psalms are divine-human prayers and hymns? How does this idea, however difficult to fully grasp, help us see the closeness that God wants with His people? How does it reveal, in its own way, how close to humanity, and to each of us, God is?

—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* for Friday, January 5.‡

[BSG:] The Psalter is an assortment of songs edited during the fifth century B.C. Ezra and his fellow scribes most likely organized this collection.

The book is divided into five smaller sections, showing the intention of the editors to organize the songs in a thematic way, both chronologically and historically (see chart below):

BOOK	CHAPTERS/ PSALMS	THEME	CONTENT
I	1–41	Conflict between David and Saul	Personal laments: The majority of psalms in this section mention the psalmist’s adversarial agents, designated as “my enemies.” Notable psalms among this collection include: 1, 2, and 24.
II	42–72	Kingship of David	Mention is likewise made of the enemy in many of the psalms in this section. Notable psalms: 45, 48, 51, 54–64.
III	73–89	Assyrian crisis during eighth century B.C.	Collections from the sons of Asaph and Korah. Notable psalm: 78.
IV	90–106	Theological evaluation after destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.	Collection of praise psalms: 95–100. Key psalms: 90, 103–105.
V	107–150	Praise and reflection after the exile—a new era	The Hallelujah collection: 111–117; pilgrimage: 120–134. Key psalms: 107, 110, 119.

—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* 13-14.‡

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